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# Hearing the Voices of Adolescent Boys in Choral Music: A Self-Story

Patrick K. Freer

## Abstract

The techniques of narrative inquiry may provide a framework for investigations of how the social, academic, and musical needs of adolescents can inform the process of teaching choral music in the middle grades. While a burgeoning body of narrative literature illustrates the musical experiences of individuals during instruction, missing from this dialogue are the voices of “marginalized singers” - those who want to participate in choral music but who feel excluded because of perceived ability or other attributions. When teaching strategies do not reflect the changing needs of young adolescent boys, the result can be an experience of frustration and disempowerment; this was the personal experience of the author. The author draws upon his self-story to suggest that listening to the stories of young adolescent boys about their singing experiences may provide a more complete understanding of how success and persistence can be planned for within the choral environment of middle schools.

## Introduction

“But, first, we must ask.” This brief statement closed a recent discussion I had with several colleagues about the needs of young adolescent boys in choral music experiences. We were in agreement that our understanding of the needs of adolescent singers has been enhanced by several decades of research about the developing adolescent voice (Cooksey, 1992; Gackle, 1991). Teaching materials and choral repertoire reflecting this research are readily accessible (e.g. Barham, 2002; Freer, 2005), and models of choirs singing in developmentally appropriate ways appear with increasing regularity at conferences and other professional gatherings of choral directors. While we concurred that this seems to be a relatively good moment for conductors of middle school and junior high choirs, there remained our pervasive concern that boys are not being well-served by choral music programs – at least as evidenced by the typically small number of male singers in mixed choirs during young adolescence. We wondered aloud whether we had an opportunity to address this pervasive concern within choral music education at the middle school level. If so, what would we do, and how would we do it? How could we arrive at answers to our own questions?

Teachers of young adolescents have a long tradition of asking these types of questions and then responding according to the cognitive, psychological, developmental and social needs of their students. The middle school movement in the United States largely emerged from teachers’ frustrations with school structures, educational philosophies, and pedagogical methods that did not seem to match the needs of the young adolescents in their classrooms (Anfara, Andrews, & Mertens, 2005). More recently, the influential *Turning Points* publications (Carnegie Council, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000) synthesized much of the research concerning effective middle schools and provided structural guidance for how middle level education could continue to take its pedagogical cues from students, rather than simply layering additional academic demands on them in the context of an overburdened educational system. Much of the current resistance to increased testing at the middle school level is grounded in an awareness of how adolescents process information and make sense of their world. That awareness has grown through decades of listening to the stories of adolescents and acting on those stories to influence

teaching practice within classrooms. Could listening to the voices of adolescent boys yield similar results for choral music educators?

The topic of boys' singing in middle school holds particular interest for me because of my own experience as a choral singer during my adolescent years. Several decades later I began to see how those experiences shaped my educational philosophies, instructional practices, and research agenda. My own experiences as adolescent singer, adult musician, and professional educator have led me to conclude that choral music education has systematically ignored the needs of adolescent boys by not sufficiently using boys' stories to inform pedagogy and practice. I believe this neglect (of the "voices" of students) has resulted in a gap between the goals and the methods of choral music education - a gap that seems to affect boys more than girls, as evidenced in the disproportionately low enrollment of boys in middle school and junior high choral programs (Gates, 1989; Harrison, 2002, 2004; Quinn, 2004).

It might be easy to say, "But we've heard this all before." Yes, we have – for many, many years. The clarion call came twenty years ago when Van Camp authored a provocative series of articles in the *Choral Journal* that illustrated the magnitude of the problem and offered a plan for remedying the situation (1987, 1988a, 1988b). Van Camp reported the results of surveys and interviews with teachers from each state in the United States. He reported that the number of participants in school choral programs had declined significantly in the years prior to the study, and he focused much of his attention on the lack of male singers in choral programs. Van Camp's respondents suggested many reasons for the decline of male involvement in school choral music, including a lack of role models, a preponderance of female music teachers, repertoire with inappropriate vocal ranges, and a host of related issues. In his 1987 open letter to the profession, Van Camp wrote,

We must find the time to get better acquainted with the students with whom we work. What are they seeking? Where are they going? What are their hopes, fears, dreams, and desires? How can we serve (and that's what teaching should be) if we ? do not know those whom we are serving... ? We had better be *listening* all the time. They are trying to tell us how to help them. (p. 17, spacing and italics in original?)

To date, however, Van Camp's recommendation that we listen remains largely unfulfilled. We have not sufficiently sought to understand the problem from the viewpoint of those most affected by it – adolescent boys. Until we seek, value, and respond to the needs of the boys who continue to be underserved by our choral programs, we will be no more successful in remedying the situation than we have been in the past two decades.

The purpose of this article is to reinvigorate Van Camp's call to listen to the voices of school-age students about their personal experiences with the practice and pedagogy of choral music. This article is oriented toward the attrition and/or retention of young adolescent boys in school choruses. I believe strongly that girls' voices should not be excluded from our conversations, but I argue here that we have not adequately listened to boys' perspectives, and we therefore do not really know what steps might be effective in attracting and retaining boys within school choral music programs. I continue with an overview of how the process of narrative inquiry might be helpful in guiding our understanding of these issues, then present three scenes from my own musical development as a point of departure for this reinvigorated call to listen to the voices of boys. I conclude by proposing that narrative inquiry may be an effective means of interrogating student experience in order to improve our pedagogy, our practice, and the persistence of boys in choral music.

"But, first, we must ask."

## **Theoretical Context**

Some of the most powerful descriptions of the lives of young adolescents have come from the students themselves, as collected through a variety of research methodologies. For example, Lounsbury led a series of narrative studies over four decades that related the experiences of middle school students in various school environments (Lounsbury & Marani, 1964; Lounsbury & Johnson, 1988; Lounsbury & Clark, 1990). In a study of eight adolescents over a period of three years, Hersch literally became a student again in her attempt to collect the narratives and understand the experiences of young people (1999). Other research has utilized brief repeated surveys of the same individuals over time, such as the influential studies of adolescents conducted by Csikszentmihalyi and others (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Larson, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2001). While survey techniques are informative, they rarely allow for gathering unscripted narratives in which young people may present information that is wholly unanticipated.

Allowing for the emergence of unanticipated information can both delight and terrorize researchers and teachers in music and other fields. Fortunately, a burgeoning body of narrative-based research reveals the experiences of participants in music instruction and performing ensembles (Conway, 2003). Notable among these are Campbell's conversations with young children (1998), Kennedy's research with junior high school boys who sing in choral ensembles (2002, 2004), and the explorations of gender issues in traditional choral music programs serving adolescents (Adler & Harrison, 2004) and young adults (O'Toole, 2005a, 2005b). In other studies utilizing narrative techniques, Monks (2003) has begun collecting information about the relationship between adolescent vocal development and vocal identity, while Durrant (2005) has explored the influence of choral conductors on the musical identities of choristers. Two recent doctoral dissertations have employed narrative techniques to gather the stories of high school chorus members as a basis for exploring the impact of choral music on the lives of its participants (Arasi, 2006; Stickford, 2004).

A common thread emerging from these various narratives of musical experience is the importance of understanding the perspective of the individual music-maker, honoring their own terms and their own perceptions. Similarly, a lengthening line of non-narrative research indicates that adolescent music students attribute their success or failure in music to their individual abilities (e.g. Schmidt, 1995; Legette, 1998). Collectively, these findings suggest that when students perceive themselves as failures in music, that self-perception becomes their expectation for all future experiences in music. Furthermore, findings related to self-perception provide a critical reason to build success for individual singers into methods of instruction for middle level choirs. Success in choral music education is not solely a matter of composite work by an entire ensemble. While satisfying concert performances and positive contest ratings may be meaningful for conductors and school administrators, the perceptions of individual singers of their personal musical abilities determines continued participation in musical practice (e.g. Ruddock & Leong, 2005).

Listening to adolescent boys as they describe their experiences in choral music may yield interesting and enlightening information for music educators concerned about their persistence in choral singing. Some examples of narratives of adolescent male singers have appeared in music education research journals (e.g. Kennedy, 2002), and they are helpful in providing a framework for continuing discussions. Largely missing from the conversation, however, are the voices of boys who are not participating in choral music at school. We need to hear the stories of choral music education through the narratives of at least three groups of boys: those who sing in choral

music ensembles; those who withdraw, including those who feel marginalized from the process because they don't see a connection between choral music and their lives or abilities; and those who never begin. We need to develop a research agenda that seeks to understand the experiences of all those boys so that we might better know how to engage young adolescents in choral music.

The inclusion of narrative in the design of research is often intended as a means to “uncover, describe, and interpret the meaning of experience” (Lieblich, 1997, p. xi). Polkinghorne (1995) contends that narrative inquiry can take one of two forms, either paradigmatic or narrative. In paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry, stories are gathered as data and examined for themes, categories, and taxonomies. Narrative-type narrative inquiry “gathers events and happenings as its data and uses narrative analysis procedures to produce explanatory stories” (p. 5). Narrative data can be considered part of “those language processes that incorporate linguistic activities conducted between individuals or groups and without the use of scripts, memorized texts, or other literary devices” (Mello, 2002, p. 241). Narrative data must be rich in detail and robust in quantity if it is to lead toward a theory that can be transferred or ‘generalized’ to any practical extent. Multiple viewpoints must be invited, descriptive data must be probed for continuities and ambiguities, and discrete elements of data must be analyzed for coherence, purpose, and/or meaning (Gergen & Davis, 2003; Mello, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) encourage researchers to look at situations both backward and forward when they are examining stories and narrative data. Researchers should seek to understand the moment of a present situation, situations that occurred in the past, and the impact of those situations on the future. Within music education, then, scholars might seek to more fully understand how adolescents experience instruction in the present, develop longitudinal studies to follow changes in experience and perceptions of experience over time, and examine relationships between the adolescent experience during instruction and later involvement in music-making as adults. These types of inquiry might fit Polkinghorne's (1995) definition of narrative-type narrative inquiry. Research that looks backward might seek reflective stories of adults regarding their musical experiences as adolescents and might be considered paradigmatic-type narrative inquiry under Polkinghorne's framework (1995).

The following three episodes illustrate aspects of my self-story from the perspectives of student, teacher, and researcher (Bulloch & Pinnegar, 2001). These episodes are labeled “memory pictures” because they are autobiographical portraits of sequenced events. Fottland (2004) developed the concept of memory pictures to describe her use of autobiographical episodes when examining reflexively her growth as a teacher. Autobiography employs narratives in the telling of stories, but it is not, strictly speaking, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987). Where narrative inquiry is “primarily concerned with the mundane,” routine events that occur over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 1987, p. 136), a central task of autobiography is to present “a particular reconstruction of an individual's narrative, and there could be other reconstructions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 39). Narrative inquiry may begin with autobiographical data, but narrative inquiry seeks to examine these personal stories from perspectives that may not be readily apparent to the subject, including dimensions of temporality, place, and the personal/social experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These “polyvocal, conspiratorial conversations” (Barone, 2001, p. 151) enrich our understanding of narrative data – including autobiographical, reflexive stories – by providing nuance, detail, and objectivity.

Grumet (2001) notes that reflexivity “can dwindle into the paralysis of infinite regression or self-absorbed trivia” (p. 174). She continues, “If we can recognize the structures of narrative, then we may examine the processes of our own subjectivities and of the education that has

contributed to their shaping” (p. 174). That autobiographical stories are subjective does not preclude them from being valid or reliable, but the subjectivity itself must be defined and acknowledged (Barone, 1992, 2001; Feldman, 2005). This postmodernist view, however, does not negate the power of memory to serve as “the glue that holds meaning together, that allows for a life story to be fashioned and related” (Barone, 2001, p. 165). According to Fottland, memory pictures, then, are situated as “conversations I have had with myself... . The *now* of writing has helped me understand the *then* of the narrative and my own place in a school-history context” (2004, p. 644).

The following three memory pictures are offered as a starting point for understanding how the trivial, perhaps mundane, first encounter of an adolescent boy with his changing voice can potentially affect involvement in music later in life. These brief memory pictures are autobiographical in nature; they are offered in the spirit of both self-study and narrative inquiry. As such, any self-study should be, among other things, “a good read” that “attends to the ‘nodal moments’ of teaching and being a teacher educator...and offers new perspective” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 19), and should fulfill Barone’s criteria of a research text that is “more or less useful or, in varying degrees and ways, persuasive” (1992, p. 26).

### **The First Picture: Musical Growth**

I grew up in a rural community about ten miles from a small city of 20,000 residents. I attended a small public school in which all grades were housed within a single building. The same teacher taught all general and choral music classes during my elementary and secondary schooling. I was the quintessentially musical child, volunteering to sing in class at each opportunity, waving my hands like I was the conductor at every concert I attended, and trying to sing harmony during the hymn sings at church. I joined the elementary choir in fourth grade. When I returned to school for my fifth grade year, my voice had begun to change; as I recall, it was a particularly rapid, unwieldy, and not so subtle process. My music teacher told me to stand in the back of the choir and mouth the words. These were not instructions I wanted to hear. Believing that I could not sing, I immediately quit choir.

My parents enrolled me in piano lessons. I took to the piano with ease, breezing rapidly through the archetypal John Thompson series and onto the “real” literature. I stepped into accompanying when our church organist suddenly fell ill and I took over at the piano. Within a year or so I was accompanying for congregational singing, church choir, the community choir, community musicals, and various other functions. I realize now that in each of these instances I was involved with singing, except that I was not the one doing the singing.

A quirk of fate put me in the office of the choral director on my first day of college orientation. I had been looking for my advisor in the pre-law program, but I took a wrong turn and found myself instead in a hallway outside auditions for the college production of “Fiddler on the Roof.” At that moment the pianist was sight-reading rather unsuccessfully a selection presented by one of the auditionees. I volunteered to step in and played the audition without pause. The choral director then asked me what I was majoring in. “Pre-law,” I replied. He asked me if I wanted to become a lawyer. I replied, “Not really.” He asked me what I really wanted to do. “Become a choir director,” I said. He asked me why I was not pursuing music in college, and I responded, “Because I can’t sing.” He said, “Well, let’s see if that’s really true,” and led me through some vocal exploration activities.

The rest is history. It’s a history of a college student with a passion for singing and choral music. It’s also a history that would not have occurred had it not been for a teacher who told me,

“No, you can’t,” and another who later told me, “Yes, you can.” I was initially bitter about the lost years of choral singing and the camaraderie I might have had with fellow choir members. I didn’t excel at anything else that involved other school kids for the duration of my junior high and high school years. If I had shown athletic prowess, I might have joined a sports team or another such activity. What I wanted to do was music, and I couldn’t do that at school. So, I sought musical experiences outside of school and one step removed from singing.

### **The Second Picture: Teacher Growth**

I graduated from college convinced I was the next great choral conductor. Unfortunately, the seven girls and one boy in my first high school chorus were not quite as convinced! The eight-member high school chorus was fine enough, but I became curious about why the middle school chorus had nearly two hundred members, almost all of whom dropped out of choral music upon entering the high school. I began to work with the middle school boys in hopes of providing a smoother transition to high school.

Like all middle school choral teachers, I encountered issues of incorporating the male changing voice into my existing paradigm of choral music. I had not begun to incorporate implications from research about adolescence and the changing voice into my teaching practice. Although I was vaguely aware that this information might be useful, I resisted implementation because it suggested that traditional approaches to performance and pedagogy might need to be modified when working with young adolescents. I was convinced that the challenges of middle school choral work could be met by simply setting high standards for student achievement and choral performance.

My earliest teaching experiences with middle school students quickly caused me to rethink my position. I recall one instance in particular. During his audition for the advanced choir, one 12-year-old boy expressed frustration that he could not phonate on the lowest pitches required by the voice part assigned to the “guys.” At this moment, I realized the impact that my words and actions might have on this boy: if I said or did the wrong thing, he might quit rather than continue to sing through the process of voice change. I really didn’t know what to do, and I asked the boy to return the next day so that I could take some time to consider the options. When I went to greet him at the appointed time, I found him standing in the hallway, audibly growling on low pitches with a strained expression on his face. I asked what he was doing, and he replied, “I’m trying to get my voice to change so you won’t kick me out of choir.” My life had come full circle: now I was the teacher who might tell a student that he could not sing because of his changing voice.

That moment forever changed my teaching. I began to learn all that I could about adolescent vocal development, learning characteristics, and teaching practices that were responsive to the needs of middle school students. I experimented with repertoire that allowed boys to be placed on multiple voice parts according to their development, rehearsal formats that both allowed for group work and invited student autonomy, and performances that did not depend on traditional “stage, robe, and riser” ensemble presentations. My choral work gradually moved from a conductor-centered approach to a student-centered orientation.

Meanwhile, I started a non-auditioned community chorus as a way to build community support for choral music. This ensemble eventually grew into a 115-member ensemble. From the first rehearsal, though, I noticed a group of about seven or eight husbands who faithfully attended rehearsals with their wives, but who sat in the back of the room as non-participating observers. Over time, I discovered that, at one point or another, each of them had been told by a

music teacher that they couldn't sing, couldn't match pitch, or were tone deaf. But, they loved music and they loved listening to the rehearsals (and second-guessing my decisions as conductor!). After a bit of cajoling and a good dose of humor, these fellows joined the chorus and eventually helped develop workshops designed for reluctant singers who wanted to join but who were convinced they lacked the requisite skills. The participants in these workshops were nearly always men.

This, then, became the central focus of my career – to explore the circumstances which might prompt one music teacher to say, “No, you can’t” while another might say, “Yes, you can.”

### **The Third Picture: Researcher Growth**

About ten years later, I found myself designing my doctoral research project around this question. I had focused on an analysis of student experience during middle school choral rehearsals in relation to the teacher language used during those rehearsals. The result was a mixed-method research design exploring the effects of teacher language on the quality of experience of the students. I gathered some of the quantitative data via the Experience Sampling Form developed by Csikszentmihalyi for use with adolescents (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987; Turner, et al, 1998). Variants of this form have been used extensively over the past decades, and the version I employed consisted of twelve semantic differential items and three items in which students entered numerical ratings concerning their experience in the rehearsal. The very qualities of the form that made it a useable research tool, however, also limited the data that the study could have provided.

My intent was to link several aspects of the choral rehearsal along the dimensions of time, place, and context as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). But, probably because my advisors in graduate school rightly viewed this project as a precursor to further research studies, the dimensions were accounted for only in pre-specified terms. There was no opportunity for students to relate their experiences using their own words in their own ways. Was this a flaw in the design of the study? No, the design accurately reflected the research questions. But, the design itself certainly did not allow for the entire story to be told.

When I appeared before the graduate faculty for the last examination prior to data collection, the head of the department made a curious statement that has remained in my mind through the intervening years. He said, “This study will intrigue you, but it will not sustain you for the long haul.” I was bewildered at the time, but I have come to understand what he meant: looking at surface-level data is necessary, but the real joy will come when trying to understand the deeper meanings that can result from a more extensive inquiry.

### **Looking Forward: Opportunities & Challenges**

My personal experiences as an adolescent musician have influenced my view and portrayal of these three pictures. The process of developing these memory pictures has enhanced my empathy for some adolescent boys who feel disenfranchised by the choral experience. Like many of these boys, I simply found music elsewhere. Where I found music in the piano studio and church, many of the boys who have been marginalized from choral music are actively involved in garage bands and other non-traditional musicking experiences outside of school (Adler & Harrison, 2004). I’ve only recently begun to systematically inquire about the choral/singing experiences of these boys and to examine them for what they might tell us about teaching and learning music. I have become fascinated by the videotaped and interview data



collected during my graduate research project but not considered central to the purposes of the study. Did I so tightly control the data collection and analysis processes that I unintentionally “divorced the original story from its human environment” (Mello, 2002, p. 235)? I am eager to design a study that captures the data that I now feel was missing from that project: unstructured interviews with the students about their experiences.

Several reviews of existing research within choral music education have appeared at various intervals during the past sixty years (Modisett, 1955; Gonzo, 1973; Hylton, 1983; Grant & Drafall, 1991; Grant & Norris, 1998). In each case, the authors have remarked about the paucity of literature relating teacher action to student learning. In the most recent of the reviews, the authors could locate only four such studies. When I began writing about choral music education research in the early 1990s, I focused entirely on quantitative data, such as counting various types of teacher verbal comments and/or student behavioral responses (Freer, 1992). In my most recent practitioner-based work, I have begun including the words of young adolescents to help ground the relationships between theory, research, and practice (Freer, 2005). What caused the shift in my orientation toward research and practice during those years? The realization that my own experiences as an adolescent singer have much to contribute toward how I work with adolescents today.

In the backward view of my memory pictures, I can see how my current pedagogical views have been influenced by my past experiences. My identity as a teacher is as much a product of my experience as a result of what I’ve come to know through study and research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The narrative unity evidenced in the progression of these pictures is more than a description of events. To me, it provides a sense of meaning and purpose to the actions I choose as a teacher and researcher (Connelly & Clandinin, 1987). The meaning and purpose that I now sense, however, were given impetus by the words of the middle school boy who told me, “I’m trying to get my voice to change so you won’t kick me out of choir.” My identity as a teacher shifted in that instant; I realized that I held keys that could unlock the door to future experiences for my students. I could either decide when the door could (or should) be unlocked, or I could invite students to become collaborators as we opened the doors together.

Collecting and honoring the narratives of young adolescent boys about singing and choral music may assist us in envisioning a “range of choices in how we enact our teacher role as well as in how we choose to identify ourselves” (Florio-Ruane, 2001, p. 26). If, as noted above, research in choral music education has often overlooked the relationship between teacher action and student learning, middle school choral teachers may wish to consciously listen to and understand the experiences of young adolescent singers, particularly boys, as part of a process of re-conceptualizing their own professional identities, pedagogies, and practices. As Richie and Wilson (2000) write:

We argue that the development of a professional identity is inextricable from personal identity and that when personal and professional development are brought into dialogue, when teachers are given the opportunity to compose and reflect on their own stories of learning and of selfhood within a supportive and challenging community, then teachers can begin to resist and revise the scripting narratives of the culture and begin to compose new narratives of identity and practice. They can begin to author their own development. (p. 1)

This re-conceptualization, applied to the teaching of choral music, invites us to take a critical view of our current practices with an eye toward a pedagogy that reflects singing and choral music as lived by young adolescents (Abrahams, 2005). Such a critically responsive

approach to pedagogy (Jakubowski, 2003) would incorporate student experience, critical thinking, reflection, and action into the process of developing instructional methods and materials as guided by the experience and insights of their teachers. Davidson (2002) notes that the stories of teachers and learners are intertwined. She writes:

This journey of self that occurs in schools is both the student's journey and the teacher's journey. Educational studies often focus us on the journey of one or the other (a legitimate thing to do and necessary in setting the parameters of a study), but we forget that self is emerging for teacher and student every day through their multiple encounters. What it is that endures then endures for both, and both enter into future life encounters with this "thing that endures" as part of the experience with which they shape future iterations of the self. It binds us together – our knowledge is embedded in the joint experience. (p. 120)

If we wish for singing and choral music to become part of the "self" of adolescent boys and girls, we must listen to the experiences of young adolescents as expressed through their words and stories. Then, we can reflect what we learn from them in our teaching and rehearsing as the culmination of a constantly renewing cycle of inquiry, theory, research, and practice. It may be that what we learn will contradict current practice and time-honored traditions within the field. The traditional relationship between choir and conductor may need to be rethought (Shively, 2005). The repertoire that Budiansky (2005a, 2005b) famously labeled, "nice enough, if completely unmemorable" might no longer form the core of our repertory for middle school choirs. It could be replaced with repertoire that better connects to the musical lives of adolescents.

Twenty years ago, Van Camp (1987) urged the choral music profession to begin addressing problems of attracting and retaining boys to the choral art. He implored us to listen to the voices our students: "We had better be *listening* all the time. They are trying to tell us how to help them" (p. 17).

"But, first, we must ask."

### ***About the author***

Patrick K. Freer received his BM and MM degrees from Westminster Choir College of Rider University, and his Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University. He is presently head of the music education division in the School of Music at Georgia State University. His DVD series, "Success for Adolescent Singers: Unlocking the Potential in Middle School Choirs," is published by Choral Excellence, Inc.

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